

Editorial

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February – 2009

Editorial

Terry Anderson
IRRODL, Editor

This issue marks the tenth anniversary of The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning - the world's most widely read and cited distance education journal! We are pleased, proud, and grateful for your help in making IRRODL this success. An open access journal only succeeds by the efforts of many - through readership, funding, submission of articles, and willingness to review.

This latest issue of IRRODL demonstrates the considerable efforts of our new managing editor, Brigitte McConkey. Brigitte has replaced Paula Smith, whom many of you will know from her 8 years of work as managing editor of IRRODL. Paula has left Alberta to seek her fortune in the high tech industry in California and all of us send her best wishes and thanks for her very significant contributions to IRRODL. Brigitte brings considerable technology and editorial experience from her former position at Douglas College in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Beyond introducing this month's articles, I wanted to take space in this editorial to talk about the continuing evolution and development of social software for use in distance education programming. The absence of physical contact in distance education leaves a great deal of opportunity for the growth of 'transactional distance,' which has been associated with the absence of academic, social, and institutional integration and associated attrition. Many researchers, practitioners, and pundits are exploring the potential of social software to bridge this distance. As the functionality, accessibility, and number of users increase, social software affords a sense of transparency and means of interaction that in some ways may even surpass that experienced face-to-face. For example, how can you search the profiles of those seated behind you in a classroom to see who shares a hobby, a special interest, a past experience, or the potential for a bus ride home together?

Many see the greatest potential for social software in enhancing informal and self-directed learning. However, I think that social software has at least as great a potential to transform formal education. Social software provides the means by which formal education can break out of the social, ethnic, regional, and economic barriers and online ghettos that can create a hidden curriculum in even distance education. By expanding our distance education programming through participation and observation by those from different social classes, backgrounds, and nationalities, we enrich the experience of both learners and teachers. As Ronald Burt accurately notes "People who live in the intersection of social worlds are at higher risk of having good ideas" (Burt, 2005, p. 90). As distance educators we need to help both ourselves and our learners to situate ourselves at such intersections. More importantly, we need to create, nourish, and develop these intersections in our educational programming.

The adoption of open standards, open educational resources, open pacing, and open teaching that are associated with social software promises a means to reaffirm and re-envision our commitment to open and distance learning. It is disappointing to see that an institution calling itself an open university may have the most rigid entrance requirements, pacing, fees, and monolithic curriculum. We are now

empowered and challenged to do more than eliminate prerequisites if we are to claim to be supporting truly open education. We need to make our content, our pedagogy, and all of our processes more transparent and accessible to all – even to those not currently enrolled, but who are able to benefit from our programming.

Overview of this Issue's Articles

As always, I am confident that you will enjoy and learn from the research results, insights, and recommendations of the authors of articles in this issue.

The first by Liz Harvey-Carter, M.A., is a critical review of the use of community radio in Sri Lanka. Radio has great potential for use in all regions of the world most importantly because of its accessibility and cost effectiveness, yet there are challenges associated with the use of any educational medium, as demonstrated in this article.

The context of the next article by Katarina Pisutova-Gerber and Jana Malovicova is Slovakia and an investigation of critical thinking in online threaded discussions. The article documents the challenges for students in thinking deeply and in public, using new media.

The third article moves to the Caribbean where Michael L. Thomas and Judith Soares document the challenges and opportunities of academic partnerships in the widely distributed campuses and programming provided by The University of the West Indies.

Canadian, Michael Barbour, then reviews the challenges and opportunities of the thriving online high schools that are becoming an increasingly popular option for North American secondary students.

The next article demonstrates the learning power afforded through synchronous and asynchronous networking across very large geographic expanses. Osvaldo A. Muniz-Solaris and Christine Coats analyze a graduate geography course that linked students in China and USA.

We move on to a very interesting US study that looks at the importance of multiple types of interaction in a self-paced model of distance education. Jason Rhode shows that though self-pacing maximizes individual choice and freedom, it challenges the use of collaborative pedagogies.

Clayton Wright, Gajaraj Dhanarajan, and Sunday A. Reju next provide an insightful overview gleaned from their considerable experience in distance education programming in developing and emerging countries. The issues they document and discuss are critical to the creation of meaningful and effective, as opposed to convenient, yet underutilized educational programming.

Finally, Shiling McQuaide takes us back to Asia for a fascinating description and analysis of distance education techniques and programming used to support reform in Chinese primary and secondary schools.

The issue concludes with reviews of two recent books – *Distance Learning in Higher Education* and *Web-based Learning through Educational Informatics: Information Science meets Educational Computing*.

I am confident you will agree that this issue of IRRODL bears evidence of the value of researching, sharing, and documenting our global experiences of the challenges and opportunities provided through the many modalities of distance education.

